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Review of *Language and national identity in Asia*

posted October 19th, 2010

Language and national identity in Asia. Ed. by **Andrew Simpson**. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. Pp. 352. ISBN [9780199226481](#). \$55.

Reviewed by [Muhammad Aurang Zeb Mughal](#), *Durham University*

In this volume, Andrew Simpson presents the shaping of identity around language politics at different levels in South, East, and Southeast Asian countries.

Part 1 describes the role of languages in identity processes in South Asian countries like Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Part 2 discusses the examples from East Asia including China, Hong Kong, Japan, North and South Korea, and Taiwan. Part 3 highlights the linguistic issues associated with identity in Southeast Asian countries such as Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam. Middle East and Central Asia are not covered in this volume as the editor suggests writing separate volumes for these regions due to geopolitical concerns.

Eighteen chapters of the volume are written by sixteen leading scholars on language and society. Each chapter discusses the language politics in an Asian country describing the issues related to the majority, minority, and the official languages. The book does not merely deal with the national identity and official languages at state level. Therefore, this volume functions as a dialogue over culture and sub-cultures from the perspective of power politics in which language plays an important role. It also tries to explain how language has been one of the central issues in the construction of national identity in Asia in the post-colonial era and provides basis or acts as a catalyst for many separatists' movements even today. On one hand, it explains the influence of Chinese and Sanskrit on the wider parts of these regions of Asia, for instance. On the other hand, it discusses the emergence of comparatively small groups fighting for the economic and political rights differentiating themselves primarily on the basis of language from other groups.

It is obvious that there are other factors associated with identity. So, a broader picture should also be kept in consideration as the volume tries to show the historical and sociopolitical context of the role of languages in shaping the identity of Asian countries. It tells us the stories of the development of languages and their affiliations with certain

religions and geographical territories that give rise to particular identities for a group or nation. It explains how many layers of identities could be under the roof of what is called national identity just on the basis of languages.

Twenty one political maps of Asian countries and simple language free of jargons are some of the other features of this book. It would be even better if these maps could illustrate at least languages and their affiliated political boundaries, perhaps in its next edition. Researchers in history, linguistics, Asian studies, anthropology, and sociology will particularly find this volume helpful in understanding the linguistic diversities and the historical role of language in the politics of Asian countries.

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